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ABSTRACT

The news media plays an important role in shaping opinions about the character of American society. Through the news, people learn about the prevalence of human benevolence or malevolence. The author conducted several tests to evaluate the effects of news on individuals of various ages and backgrounds. Experimental groups were told that they would be taking a test about decision making. As they waited for the test to begin, radios in the waiting rooms broadcasted news reports of either a positive or negative nature. One group heard a report about a violent murder by a clergyman; another heard a report about a clergyman's donation of a kidney to a dying man. After the reports had been broadcasted the radios were turned off and the experimental groups were told that their test would begin. They answered questions about the moral and ethical dispositions of people in general. Results indicated that the groups who had heard the negative broadcasts responded more negatively to questions about society. The author comments that the nature of the news media to report exciting, novel, and violent stories promotes a public over-reaction of alienation. The author suggests that psychologists work together with the news media to present reports in such a way that they will be exciting, understandable, and give a more balanced view of human social behavior. (Author/AV)

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". . .AND NOW A STORY ABOUT TODAY'S NEWS"

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On New Years' Day, 1978, the humorist, Russell Baker wrote an article in the N. Y. Sunday Times Magazine which was entitled, "Things are tough all over." In the first paragraph he described himself happily driving along a highway in New England one winter's day. "Then," he wrote, "I made a mistake, I turned on the radio. The radio is a noble machine, but in our time it has been perverted into an instrument for crushing the human spirit. This day the radio was going about its foul labor with a zest that would have earned it, in the old days, a promotion in the Gestapo." Baker continued by describing the news that he heard, a familiar even if spirit crushing report about the events of the day.

Russell Baker is not alone in recognizing the effect of news on the "human spirit." For several years my colleagues and I have been examining related matters. We started our research with the assumption

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that people naturally hold some estimate of the extent to which the surrounding social community is filled with people who are "for them" or "agin them." These estimates are not fixed. They shift from time to time as people learn of events containing information which reveals to them something new or special about the prevalance of human benevolence or malevolence in the surrounding community. Of course, one important source of this information is the news. News recepients functions as if they were social actuaries who use the news to sample the surrounding social community and come to some conclusions about its character. These conclusions, in turn, affect inferences that are made about total strangers and influence how they are treated.

These ideas have been tested over the past five years, in a series of studies. In one of our typical experiments, for example, people sat waiting for a psychological investigation of decision-making to begin. While they were waiting, a radio near the front of the room played music. In truth, the experiment had already begun, and the radio was a ploy.

After a few minutes, the music ended and a short news report came on the air. "Here is a story in today's news," the announcer said in a trained, professional voice. And then some of the listeners in our experiment heard the announcer add the following:

"A middle-aged man will be saved, thanks to a person he has never met. The man, who suffers from a fatal kidney disease, had only a short while to live without an emergency kidney transplant. WWBG had broadcast pleas for help. Late last night a respected clergyman came to the hospital and offered to help. The donor has refused the family's offer to pay his hospital costs. Even in this day and age, some people hear a call for help."

Some of the rest however, heard a very different news story:

"A 72-year-old sculptress, beloved by neighborhood children for her statues of Winnie the Pooh, was strangled in her apartment last night by what appears to be a self-styled executioner. The murderer, who has been identified as a respected clergyman, was a long-time neighbor of the victim. He had the keys to the apartment because he occasionally baby-sat

for the victim's grandchildren and was in the habit of bringing up her mail and packages."

After each of these reports, the radio broadcast resumed its medley of music until one of us casually switched off the radio and began the "decision-making test." For example, in one case we asked listeners, who had no idea that the news report had been an experimental hoax, to guess the answers to several questions about the moral and ethical dispositions of people in general. The questions included: "What percentage of people lead clean, decent lives?" "What percentage of people are basically honest?" "What percentage of people try to apply the golden rule even in today's complex society?"

We have repeated this experiment several times, using both younger and older groups of males and females, and different news stories. The results are invariably the same. Good news produces more favorable views of humanity's general moral disposition than bad news does--despite the fact that the news deals with only certain special cases and not at all with human nature on the grand scale.

More generally, this research has demonstrated that following the presentation of "bad news," (i.e. news reports of exploitative, dishonest, unkind, or selfish behavior) people make larger and more prejudicial discriminations between similar and dissimilar others: they are less lenient in their judgments of guilt or innocence; and they are more likely to behave competitively (when given the opportunity to choose between competition and cooperation). Most importantly, these effects occur only when people listen to news in which human activity is reported. When the same happy or unhappy outcomes are attributed to natural causes, telling listeners nothing about the social community, none of these effects follows.

Clearly the news is not psychologically neutral. It is an important yet subtle source of influence on assumptions about others and behavior toward them. By changing one's general conception of people, news reports play a critical role in shaping specific inferences abour strangers. They act as a bias, creating expectations which predispose us to classify complete strangers as we or they.

Through the media, we receive a variety of messages about the conditions of the unseen social world. However, the events selected for our perusal do not always seem as if they are intended only to inform. One half century ago Merz (1927) wrote that crime, sex, novelty, and conflict make "big stories." Years have passed, but his message still seems valid. Recently Ball and Baker concluded that the criteria for determining reader interest "are . . .conflict or violence, firstness, novelty, human interest, impact, saliency, and for some, proximity (1969)."

Fearful stories about human misconduct may sell newspapers and raise Neilson ratings, but they also cause us to perceive the world as a jungle filled with men and women who are dangerous and evil. These stories create a bias toward alienation and exclusion. Security becomes paramount, and we cling to whatever is familiar and comforting, harshly rejecting whatever is unfamiliar and strange. Happy stories about human goodness, on the other hand, may be less newsworthy, but they do not create a need to exclude. Instead a tolerant orientation grows and strangers are more readily accepted into one's psychological community.

The message is clear: The news plays an important role in shaping the reality of a vast unseen community.

That message has always seemed to me to be an important one for public consumption. So one day I set aside my computer printouts and my Texas Instruments pocket calculator, put on a tie and headed for the Public Relations office at the College. I wanted to venture out beyond professional journals and share my findings with the public. The media were very responsive and encouraging. A pleasant and fruitful collaboration followed. The result was between two and three hundred newspaper articles, a magazine piece in Psychology Today, perhaps twenty or twenty-five radio interviews, several TV shows, and no real grievance on my part.

I headed for the Public Relations Office that fateful day, not so long ago, because I believed and still do, that in working with the media psychologists have a unique opportunity to apply knowledge developed in the behavioral sciences in a most meaningful way. This approach to application was beautifully captured by George Miller, in his 1969 Presidential address to the APA, when he said, ". . . I believe that the

real impact of psychology will be felt, not through the technological products it places in the hands of powerful men, but through its effects on the public at large through a new and different public conception of what is humanly possible and what is humanely desirable."

Collaboration wiht the mass media is one of the most viable ways that I can imagine for creating these "new and different public conceptions." Dangers exist. They always will: Media people and psychologists have different skills, needs and interests, and these differences create unavoidable, but not unhealthy tensions. For example, there are

(1) Tensions about Detail_ Media people want "punchy" inputs in order to attract attention and drive messages home. Psychologists, however, are in the very important business of identifying qualifiers and splitting theoretical hairs.

(2) Tensions about Language - Media people understandably want to minimize jargon; it is confusing. Psychologists are not likely to defend the use of unnecessary jargon, but the tradition of avoiding commonplace words which are too pregnant with meaning

is essential in serious scientific discourse.

(3) Tensions about Conclusions - Media people understand their audience and its need for solutions to problems that they either know they have or are told they have. Psychologists are trained to be cautious about moving too far from data, promising more than can be defended with the last t-test.

(4) Tensions about Audience - Media people's and psychologist's careers both depend on how their work is evaluated by co-professionals and organization superiors. But our careers march ahead (or backward) to the beat of different drums. As joint efforts approach completion, each professional must test them against the evaluative criteria of his or her own we-group.

These tensions cannot become deterrents. Certainly they present pitfalls which may cause media people and psychologists to trip into fruitless conflict. But these tensions can also become forces which help shape public information about psychology so that it is accurate as well as exciting and understandable. In this way, we may find our best

hope of imparting to the public "new and different public conceptions about what is humanly possible and what is humanely desirable."

For additional information see:

Hornstein, H.A. Cruelty and kindness. Prentice Hall, 1976 (paperback).

Holloway, S. and Hornstein, H.A. "How good news makes us good." Psychology Today, December, 1976.